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Stephen Aron. *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border States.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006. xxi + 301 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34691-9.

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Published on H-Atlantic (August, 2007)

At the Confluence of Atlantic and American Histories

Stephen Aron's name might not be familiar to many Atlantic world scholars, unless they also consider themselves borderlands historians. In the latter case, they will recognize him as half of the Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron duo who wrote the 1999 Forum Essay "From Borderland to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History."[1] In spite of its decidedly American title and perspective, much of *American Confluence* does in fact deal with the Missouri region as one borderland of Atlantic world concerns, tracing its history as a place where Spanish, French, British (and later American) colonial interests collided and played themselves out. In doing so, the book makes a fascinating and useful contribution to both Atlantic world and North American West scholarship–a claim certainly few other monographs could make.

The "confluence" in question is the region where the Missouri, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers meet, and the author focuses primarily "on the last two-thirds of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth" (p. xiii). Many different peoples met, overlapped, displaced, and replaced each other in this region. Aron's interest is in how the area moved from its position as a colonial borderland to one as a border state where the spatial battles over slavery would begin.

The book is organized into six chapters, with one-word titles that can seem a bit unhelpful and misleading. "Openings" sketches the pre-contact Native American cultures and peoples who met and traded in the confluence region, before quickly moving on to the seventeenth-century arrival of Spanish and French explorers, traders, and missionaries. The Osages were the most powerful Indian group in the area at the time of contact and were able to force these newcomers to engage with them on their own terms. "Traditions" describes the ways in which the first white settlements in the area created unique local patterns of governance and landholdings, sometimes resembling their French colonial roots and sometimes resembling the English colonies to the east. In the 1760s France handed its territory west of the Mississippi to Spain, turning the confluence region into part of the boundary between competing Spanish and British claims in North America. The "Newcomers" of chapter 3 clearly were not the first group of newcomers to the region, but this chapter likely gained its name from the fact that Americans (as post-Revolutionary Americans and not British subjects) entered the area in larger numbers, along with Indian tribes like the Shawnees and Delawares who had been forced out of the Ohio valley. These newcomers brought real and more substantial threats to both Spanish rule and Osage dominance. In "Transfers" we see the confluence pass out of the Atlantic world and firmly into American hands, as it passes from Spain back to France, then, shortly thereafter, to the United States. This would be the beginning of the end for American Indian self-determination in the region. The space then took its more familiar place in American history as the jumping-off point for the 1804-06 Lewis and Clark expedition and as an epicenter of the fight over slave versus free land. Having now moved from borderland to border state, the book, in "Quakes," describes the Americanization of Missouri during and shortly after the War of 1812. "Closings" discusses Missouri's role in the origins of the uniquely American fur trade institution, the mountain man; the state's Indian removal policy; and its handling of slavery in the 1820s and 1830s. The epilogue ranges over the contemporary commercialization and whitewashing of Lewis and Clark before moving back to finish the story of Missouri's role in the Civil War.

Aron states in the introduction that a key aspect of borderlands history is to avoid reading history and geography "backwards" (p. xv), that is, from the knowledge of nineteenth-century history and contemporary borders. However, as the chapter summaries make clear, he is not able to completely avoid the pitfall: the book is written

to culminate with Missouri's role in the war over slavery and to explain how Missouri moved from the borderlands of multiple European empires to an internal American border state. The first few chapters maintain a wider geographical focus but the last three must inevitably focus on Missouri itself. No matter how hard we try, borderlands historians have not yet managed to escape the problem of "reading backwards." For us, perhaps even more than other historians, knowing how the story ends creates real methodological challenges.

Atlantic scholars will notice that the first two chapters contain very few primary sources, and the primary sources in chapters 3-6 are mostly from the British/American side of things. His arguments about Indian politics and French and Spanish colonization rely very heavily, therefore, on secondary sources. This is a contributing factor to the problematic American exceptionalism upon which the book is premised. The book opens with the statement, "In the heart of North America, the continent's three greatest rivers come together" (p. xiii), followed a few pages later by the sentence "no other location in North America saw such traffic from points near and far" (p. xvii). Neither gets a footnote to explain his criteria. Certainly within the history of the United States these three rivers were very important, and they were undeniably critical to French, Spanish, and American aspirations in the region, but projecting their significance over the rest of the continent will raise flags for many readers.

The metaphors are also a bit heavy at times, making the book feel more weighed-down and wordier than it needed to be. For example, in chapter 4 ("Quakes"), in a discussion of the significant white and black migration into Missouri in the 1810s and 1820s, Aron writes, "the postwar flow of newcomers deposited a thick residue on the territory's political and economic landscape. Overrunning some customary banks, the flood of people cut fresh channels to governing power and economic well-being" (p. 169). *American Confluence* has a rich tale to tell without the language adding quite so much to the richness.

The mere fact that this book does speak to the overlapping histories of the Atlantic world and the American West in the confluence region makes it both interesting and important, even if it does not quite meet the lofty goal Aron has set for himself.

Note

[1]. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814-841.

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Citation: Sheila M. McManus. Review of Aron, Stephen, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border States*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13519

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